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ABSTRACT

Just as rhetoric is a way of knowing, so is poetic, both of which, for Francis Bacon, produce false knowledge. But Bacon is not entirely negative. When the poetic elements of language are used in strategic and public communication, like the scholarly communication Bacon attempts to reform, poetic and rhetoric work together to create a plurality of knowledge about human experience--the crux of Bacon's ambivalence. In the "Novum Organum" he classifies four types of idols or false notions that confound human understanding--idols of the tribe, the cave, the market-place, and the theater. Bacon believes that the mind is attracted to these fancies because human understanding is likely to suppose the existence of more order and regularity in the world than it finds. To insure the communication of true knowledge, Bacon proposes to reform human thought with a new inductive method of reasoning that bases knowledge on sense perception, thereby achieving certainty. Yet, a tension exists between, on the one hand, his desire to restrict the imitative capacity of language--poetic--to words that represent actual sense perception and, on the other hand, the successful use of language in communication. Bacon's consciousness of his ambivalence toward the poetic causes him to err on the side of logic and reason. (Twenty-eight footnotes are appended.) (NKA)

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# Poetic and Francis Bacon's Ambivalence Toward Language

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ABSTRACT

Francis Bacon exhibits an ambivalence toward the imitative, poetic quality of language. Just as rhetoric is a way of knowing so is poetic, both of which, for Bacon, produce false knowledge. At best rhetoric supplies reason to the imagination for the better moving of the will. Bacon argues that reason should restrict poesis to a precise imitation of nature to communicate truth. Yet, to gain "quiet entry" to the mind, Bacon himself employs the poetic qualities of language to create meaning and understanding.

Poetic and Francis Bacon's

Ambivalence Toward Language

In the writings of Francis Bacon a reader discovers an ambivalence toward language, both a condemnation and a celebration of how humans communicate. Bacon condemns the "idols" of the mind, which language creates; yet, he celebrates the clarity and effectiveness of the analogy, aphorism, fable, and hieroglyph in clearly communicating an author's ideas. Bacon's ambivalence is toward what I consider a poetic quality of language, that of imitation. With language, poets and rhetors create images that imitate objects and life as we sense it, but without making these imitations exact representations of what we sense around us.

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to clarify what I mean by the imitative capacity of language. It is the capacity of language to create images that resemble or account for human experience and perception. Not surprisingly, Plato and Aristotle recognize this capacity of language in poetry. Plato wishes to ban the poet from his ideal city, because the imitation of the poet is "thrice removed from the truth."[1] In Plato's Ion we discover that Plato does not condemn poetry if the poet is divinely inspired, since divine inspiration produces poetry that more accurately reflects divine truth, than poetry that lacks such inspiration.[2] In contrast, Aristotle is much less willing to condemn poetry as an inferior imitation of truth. He argues that humans have an instinct for imitation and gain pleasure from observing things imitated. "Thus the reason why men

enjoy seeing a likeness is, that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, 'Ah, that is he!' For if you happen not to have seen the original, the pleasure will be due not to the imitation as such, but to the execution, the colouring, or some such other cause."[3] Aristotle does not require that the product of imitation accurately represent the object of imitation. A poet may inspire the audience by representing objects and events as better than the audience sees them, repulse the audience by representing objects and events as worse than they see them or entertain the audience by representing objects and events as they see them. "It follows that we must represent men either as better in real life, or as worse, or as they are."[4] Aristotle never requires that these imitations accurately represent the imitated objects, only that they help achieve the poet's end or heighten the poetic effect of the work.[5]

Aristotle describes what may be considered an epistemic function of poetic, that poetic can produce knowledge about human experience, as well as pleasure.[6] Poetic imitation may provide a provocative explanation of a human situation, like Antigone's dilemma in Sophocles' play of the same name. Should Antigone obey the law of the state or a higher, divine law? Sophocles' play provides us with an explanation of this situation, of the available options for action from which we may choose, as well as the preferred course of action. Sophocles' imitation, however, is one of many imitations poetry may provide. Different poets may provide us with new imitations of

Antigone's plight and, thus, new knowledge and understanding of this situation. If the imitation is plausible, questions about its accuracy are irrelevant, for we gain knowledge about this human experience whether or not Antigone was a real person who actually faced this dilemma, provided we willingly suspend our disbelief. This view of poetic as epistemic recognizes that poetic may provide a basis for intersubjective agreement.[7] A poetic imitation like Sophocles' play may give meaning to a human experience by providing a context for action or attributing motives to actors. If the audience willingly suspends its disbelief and symbolically participates in the imitated experience, the author and audience share knowledge (meaning) about that experience.

Poetic is a way of knowing, as rhetoric is a way of knowing. The two phenomena are different, the former is an imitative process while the latter is a strategic process. Yet, the two processes interact together. Scholars recognize that both rhetoric and poetic infuse the human use of language, sometimes becoming inseparable. Wayne Booth in The Rhetoric of Fiction argues that literature must be rhetorical to communicate a story successfully to a reader.[8] The popularity of Kenneth Burke's theory of dramatism and Ernest Bormann's fantasy theme analysis indicates a growing awareness among rhetorical scholars of the rhetorical use of poetic elements of language.

When the poetic elements of language are used in strategic and public communication, like the scholarly communication Bacon attempts to reform, poetic and rhetoric work together to create a

plurality of knowledge about human experience. It is this plurality of knowledge that is the crux of Bacon's ambivalence toward language. In the Advancement of Learning, Bacon condemns poetry as "feigned history" which places satisfaction of the imagination higher than reason.[9]

> For being as a plant that cometh of the lust of the earth, without a formal seed, it hath sprung up and spread abroad more than any other kind: but to ascribe unto it that which is due, for the expressing of affections, passions, corruptions, and customs, we are beholding to poets more than to the philosophers' works; and for wit and eloquence, not much less than to orators' harangues. But it is not good to stay too long in the theatre. Let us now pass on to the judicial place or palace of the mind, which we are to approach and view with more reverence and attention.[10]

In the Novum Organum Bacon classifies four types of idols or false notions which confound human understanding--idols of the tribe, the cave, the market-place, and the theatre. Human weakness is the source of the idol of the tribe, the self-important notion that the individual is the measure of all things, and the cave, recognition that each mind thinks in different and peculiar ways. Idols of the market-place and theatre are social weaknesses caused by the human use of language. The former is created by words which obstruct human understanding and "lead men away in numberless empty controversies and idle fancies."[11] The latter idol focuses on the plurality of systems of knowledge a person can find. These systems are imitations of reality which Bacon calls "Idols of the Theatre, because in my judgment all the received systems are but so many stage-plays, representing worlds of their own creation after an unreal and scenic fashion."[12] Bacon's explanation for why the human mind is attracted to these

idle fancies is that "human understanding is . . . prone to suppose the existence of more order and regularity in the world than it finds."[13] If a speaker or writer proposes an explanation of events which "sensibly" accounts for all factors perceived by the author, iregardless of the accuracy of the explanation, an auditor is likely to believe the explanation, for it satisfies the human desire for structure.

But what does Bacon's ambivalence toward the poetic capacity of language have to do with his conception of rhetoric? Actually a great deal, for he considers rhetoric "the doctrine concerning the Illustration of Discourse."[14] The source of these illustrations is the human imagination which reproduces and creates images, such as analogies, fables and myths.[15] The difference between poetic and rhetoric is that rhetoric restrains the imagination's "flights of fancy" with reason, so that illustrations are based on true knowledge, while poetic imitates human experience unrestrained by reason, producing fantastical images and knowledge. The orator or author uses reasoned illustrations to move the will of the audience. "The duty and office of Rhetoric is, to apply reason to the imagination for the better moving of the will."[16] Without reason, the imagination would run amuck, creating false knowledge and exciting the will for no purpose.

Bacon's objections about rhetoric ultimately focus on the type of knowledge he believes it often produces, false knowledge. To insure the communication of true knowledge, he proposes to reform human thought with a new method of reasoning, a "new induction," This new method attempts to base all knowledge on

sense perception and, thereby, achieve certainty.[17] Using sense perception as a starting point, Bacon proposes that an individual tabulate observations in a particular schema, so that one may systematically discover new facts.[18] Because these tables are based on systematic and precise observation of phenomena, a researcher avoids the dangers of deceit by language.

> The work and office of these three tables I call the Presentation of Instances to the Understanding. Which presentation having been made, Induction itself must be set at work; for the problem is, upon a review of instances, all and each, to find such a nature as is always present or absent with the given nature, and always increases and decreases with it; and which is, as I have said, a particular case of a more general nature. Now if the mind attempt this affirmatively from the first, as when left to itself it is always wont to do, the result will be fancies and guesses and notions ill defined, and axioms that must be mended every day; unless like the schoolmen we have a mind to fight for what is false; though doubtless these will be better or worse according to the faculties and strength of the understanding which is at work.[19]

Bacon's goal is to develop a system of "notes" that do not rely on words for transmission of knowledge. He believed he found such notes in hieroglyphs, which he thought presented pictures of actual objects and situations to the reader. The reader, then, exactly transfers these images to her or his mind.[20] For Bacon, the use of hieroglyphs allows the author to be certain that the image produced in the reader's mind after reading the hieroglyph is the same image the author had in her or his mind when he wrote the note. Use of hieroglyphs constrains the imitative capacity of language to the imitation of a precise image.

English and other modern languages, however, use words, not hieroglyphs. Bacon had to identify some element of modern

language systems which could adequately transmit knowledge, or create a new symbol system. Bacon opted for the former. In the Novum Organum, he states that the goal of accurate transmission of knowledge could be attained with carefully selected analogies which have "real and substantial resemblances; resemblances grounded in nature, not accidental or merely apparent; much less superstitious or curious resemblances, such as the writers on natural magic . . . are everywhere parading: similtudes and sympathies of things that have no reality, which they describe and sometimes invent with great vanity and folly."[21] Bacon severely limits the imitative potential of language by requiring that analogies be "grounded in nature, not accidental or merely apparent." Yet, a tension exists between Bacon's desire to restrict the imitative capacity of language to words which represent actual sense perception and the successful use of language in communication. In the Advancement of Learning he recognizes that fables, a form of false knowledge, sometimes can be useful in communication.

> Allusive or parabolical is a narration applied only to express some special purpose or conceit: which latter kind of parabolical wisdom was much more in use in the ancient times, as by the fables of Aesop, and the brief sentences of the Seven, and the use of hieroglyphics, may appear. And the cause was, for that it was then of necessity to express any point of reason, which was more sharp or subtile than the vulgar in that manner; because men in those times wanted both variety of examples and subtility of conceit: and as hieroglyphics were before letters, so parables were before arguments: And nevertheless now, and at all times, they do retain much life and vigour; because reason cannot be so sensible, nor examples so fit.[22]

In the later work, New Atlantis, Bacon employs an extensive fable to help explain his motives and method for reforming human

thought.[23] He could not successfully communicate his ideas by relying on sense perceptions; he had to rely upon the imagination to create a "false" image in order to communicate. In short, Bacon had to create meaning.

Bacon never says that he employs fables to create meaning, to create intersubjective agreement. Rather, the poetic quality of language is used only to illustrate the conclusions of reason and to capture the imagination so that it may support reason. "For the end of logic is to teach a form of argument to secure reason, and not to entrap it; the end likewise of moral philosophy is to procure the affections to fight on the side of reason, and not to invade it; the end of rhetoric is to fill the imagination with observations and images, to second reason, and not to oppress it."[24]

The creation of false knowledge to support reason, as exemplified by the New Atlantis, is justified because of the necessity of gaining "quiet entry" into the human mind to reform human knowledge.

> Finally ... Bacon moves naturally to a dependence on figurative language, especially the analogy presented in concrete metaphorical terms as a vital part of the philosopher's method. It will enable the philosopher to gain "quiet entry" into the minds of the receivers, yet it will also allow him to maintain the integrity of content by avoiding words and elaborate explanations in favor of pictures. It will open the way to truth by freeing the mind of concepts and illusions and forcing the reader to begin with the "simple sensuous impression."[25]

Bacon also uses fables, which create "false knowledge," to gain the quiet entry needed to eliminate false knowledge. For example, in De Augmentis Bacon describes the ancient fable of the

origin of Pan and, then, proceeds to explain the fable, to demystify it by relating each point of the fable to concrete human experience. False knowledge is transformed into true knowledge. For example, "from the third story of Pan's origin, it would seem as if the Greeks, either by intercourse with the Egyptians or otherwise, had heard some of the Hebrew mysteries. For it relates to the state of the world, not at its very birth, but after the fall of Adam; exposed and made subject to death and corruption."[26] Here, Bacon uses the fable to gain quiet entry into the imagination and then brings the reader back to the human experiences on which the fable is based, in this instance the record of history.

According to James Stephans, Bacon never felt comfortable using fables in his writing.

> He never lost his contempt for the fable and other methods of imposture; there is a tendency to treat even his own fable-making whimsically and to suggest in embarrassed tones that his audience forced him to descend to this level..Though the hieroglyph and emblem enchant him, he admits, he also says that the modern mind has all the advantages of wit, reason and knowledge to enable it to supplant myth-making with some more natural and productive method of delivery. Early in his career Bacon rejects the fable as unsuited to any but ignorant audiences, yet he later comes almost naturally to it as a vehicle for both the presentation and the preservation of knowledge. Fortunately, the poet in Bacon responds enthusiastically in later years to his new understanding of how the human imagination works. Like the aphorism, the fable can be used to describe memorably and accurately the findings of the philosopher and it is even more subtle than "fragments" in its ability to vitalize and color theory so that it remains with readers to be examined. The fable is especially useful also in the delivery of sciences which rest on opinion rather than fact; because the scientist who engages in discussion of moral or civil knowledge must argue, persuasive pictures in narrative form can perform many services for him. Because they require a minimum of words and are susceptible to as

> many interpretations as there are readers, fables come to occupy an important, if reluctantly-granted spot in Bacon's theory of the philosophical style. Exerting a remarkable and mysterious power of the minds of all men, fables work in every age, Bacon realizes to enchant and persuade. As early as The Refutation of Philosophies and the Advancement of Learning he is experimenting with the use of the "dark" method to inspire readers both with interest in his program and admiration for the author.[27]

A perusal of Bacon's later works indicates that he uses fables liberally. Stephans argues that Bacon tries to destroy one structure of knowledge by de-mystifying its fables and myths, while through the vehicle of fables and myth replace this structure of knowledge with a more modern one.[28]

It would be hasty to conclude that Bacon presents arguments supporting the position that rhetoric or poetic creates true knowledge, for he always places rhetoric below logic and reason and generally scorns poetry. It seems as if Bacon's consciousness of his ambivalence toward what I have called an imitative capacity of language, poetic, causes him to err conservatively on the side of logic and reason. Theoretically, he does not acknowledge that fables and myths may provide the meaning necessary for successful communication; yet, his writings appear to enact such an argument. It is this ambivalence, I believe, which makes Bacon's writings an interesting object of study for rhetorical scholars.

ENDNOTES

[1] Plato, Republic, trans. Paul Shorey, 597e.

[2] Plato, Ion, trans. Lane Cooper, 533c-536e.

[3] Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art, ed. SH Butcher, corrected version of the 1911 ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1932) reprinted in Criticism: The Major Statements, ed. Charles Kaplan (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975) p. 25.

[4] Aristotle's Theory, p. 23.

[5] Aristotle's Theory, p. 49.

[6] For a discussion of the structure of knowledge found in literature see Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (1957, rpt.; Princeton, New Jersey: Princton University Press, 1971).

[7] For a discussion of the implications of intersubjectivity for rhetorical theory see Barry Brummett, "Some Implications of 'Process' or 'Intersubjectivity': Poastmodern Rhetoric," Philosophy and Rhetoric, 9 (1976), 21-51.

[8] Wayne Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

[9] Francis Bacon, Advancement of Learning in Lord Bacon's Works, vol. 2 (London: William Pickering, 1825) pp. 119-120.

[10] Bacon, Advancement, p. 123.

[11] Francis Bacon, The New Organon in The Works of Francis Bacon, vol. 4, ed. James Spedding, Robert Ellis and Douglas Heath (1870, rpt.; New York: Garrett Press, Inc., 1968) p. 55.

[12] Bacon, Organon, p. 55.

[13] Bacon, Organon, p. 55.

[14] Francis Bacon, De Augmentis in The Works of Francis Bacon, vol. 4 ed. James Spedding, Robert Ellis and Douglas Heath (1870, rpt. 1 New York: Garrett Press, Inc. 1968) p. 454.

[15] See Karl Wallace's discussion of Bacon's notion of imagination in Francis Bacon on the Nature of Man (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1967).

[16] Bacon, Advancement, p. 209.

[17] Wallace, p. 6 and Bacon, New Organon, p. 40.

[18] For a concise discussion of Bacon's new induction see Karl Wallace, Francis Bacon on Communication and Rhetoric (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1943) pp. 42-44.

[19] Bacon, New Organon, p. 145.

[20] Bacon, De Augmentis, p. 440.

[21] Bacon, New Organon, p. 167.

[22] Bacon, Advancement, p. 121.

[23] Francis Bacon, New Atlantis in The Works of Francis Bacon, vol. 3, ed. James Spedding, Robert Ellis and Douglas Heath (1870, rpt.; New York: Garrett Press, Inc. 1968) pp. 121-166.

[24] Bacon, De Augmentis, pp. 455-456.

[25] James Stephens, Francis Bacon and the Style of Science (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975) p. 79.

[26] Bacon, De Augmentis, p. 320.

[27] Stephens, pp. 99-100.

[28] Stephens, pp. 137-138.